



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Assignment Ideas for Mystical Texts: Part Three

Rebecca Makas, *Villanova University*

Blog Series: Changing Scholarship

February 07, 2024

Tags: critical thinking | teaching | pedagogy | Sufism | self-reflection | Changing Scholarship | mysticism

In addition to the general tips on teaching mysticism presented in the previous blog posts (part 1 & part 2), I would like to share some in-class and writing assignments I have used when teaching 'Aṭṭār's *The Conference of the Birds*. One of the most successful in-class activities I have developed is a discussion of the birds' excuses. I created a slideshow of the various birds discussed, both in flight and at rest, and we begin by looking at these images. I then ask my students write informally on the following questions:

- Which bird's objections would match your own most closely, and why?
- Why do you think 'Aṭṭār selected this specific bird to represent this issue? (Look back to the hoopoe's original description [if applicable] and look at the slideshow for images of each bird).
- What is the hoopoe's response? Does it make you think more deeply about your own objection, or would you still decide not to go?

After writing their responses, we discuss as many birds as time allows. This assignment allows for deep reflection as it asks students to consider their relationship to the poem as well as the success (or lack thereof) of the metaphor of birds. Students are able to reflect on how to represent human characteristics in animals. It also prompts consideration of whether the hoopoe is persuasive or not, and which types of rhetoric invite change versus types which

cause people to double down on bad habits. The discussion of the hoopoe (as an allegory for a Sufi master) also allows for a conversation about whether or not a spiritual guide can have nefarious objectives, the potential danger of trusting someone else as much as the poem urges one to do, and why handing over control of one's life is appealing to some people.

The in-class activity of reflection on specific birds and their concerns can be extended to a formal paper assignment. I have asked students to argue which bird needs to go on the journey the most - which prompts them to consider what flaw they believe to be the worst and which personality types would most need the mystical path. My colleague Nancy Kelly asks her students to write a paper on this simple prompt: What excuse is missing? I have used this discussion question and find that it encourages students to think about the issues 'Aṭṭār may not have been able to foresee (such as distractions of technology) or that he simply overlooked or chose not to include (such as childcare, as Nora Jacobsen Ben Hammed observed in a 2021 AAR panel).

Because students have found the valleys to be confusing, I developed a group activity to help them understand this difficult part of the text. I put students in small groups and assign each group a single valley. I then give them a worksheet with the following questions:

- What images does 'Aṭṭār use to describe this valley? Does this imagery fit intuitively with the valley? Why or why not?
- Why do you think 'Aṭṭār places this valley at this specific point of the journey? Do you think it would make more sense earlier or later in the trip?
- Based on his language, the images, and so forth, what do you think it would feel like to experience this valley? In other words, what emotions does it bring out for you, and why?

Once the groups have finished working, we come together as a class and go through each valley one-by-one. This allows each group to feel more confident as they present a small section of the text, and when students hear the reports from other groups, they gain a new understanding of each valley. I mentioned emotions earlier, but I have found that students generally would feel anxious, scared, or unhappy. This activity prompts reflection on their anxieties around difficult situations and loss of control. In the past, I have turned this into a formal writing assignment by asking students what valley would be the most difficult for the bird they most related to. Their responses show engagement with the questions "Why are certain types of challenges harder for me? How can I prepare, or is it better to learn how to avoid these situations entirely?"

## **Conclusion**

Mystical texts offer an excellent resource for encouraging deep self-reflection. It is my hope that readers of this series of blog posts (part 1 & part 2) will be inspired to incorporate *The Conference of the Birds* or another mystical text into a future course to facilitate such reflection with their students. Undoubtedly, each reader will adapt these suggestions to the demands of their course, their teaching style, and institutional context. Though there are many other potential avenues for self-reflection through *The Conference of the Birds*, my experience

and examples highlight how a mystical text can provoke insight on identity, whether taught by specialists or non-specialists. In the absence of an exhaustive account of how to teach a mystical text, I simply hope I have provided a glimpse of what the mystical makes possible in the classroom. Yet as ‘Aṭṭār says at the end of his poem, “And I too cease: I have described the Way – Now, you must act – there is no more to say” (1984, 245).

### **Notes & Bibliography**

‘Aṭṭār, Farīd al-Dīn, Dick Davis, and Afkham Darbandi. *The Conference of the Birds*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1984.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2024/02/assignment-ideas-for-mystical-texts-part-three/>